

Gilles Deleuze and the desert island as a material utopia

Mehdi Parsa¹

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Correspondence: Mehdi Parsa, e:
mehdi.parsa.kh@gmail.com.

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Abstract

This essay seeks to unpack the idea of the absence of others as a primary structure, distinguished from the other as structure and the ego as the empirical result of the structure-other, which is formulated by Gilles Deleuze, particularly in "Michel Tournier and the World Without Others." Going from the neurotic nature of the structure-other to the psychotic nature of the absence of others as structure I argue that this transition is crucial to reach the "Great Health," marking a utopian point in Deleuze's work. I distinguish private from social schizophrenia, claiming that the latter underlies a new communicability which is more corporeal than conceptual. It would also mark an economy which departs from an exchange economy to approach Bataille's idea of solar economy. Finally, I describe the structural aspect of the dissipation of the other, or social schizophrenia, through the perverse structure, which stands against the pervert's actual behaviors.

Keywords: Gilles Deleuze; desert islands; utopia;
schizophrenia; Michel Tournier

There is a tendency in scholarship on the thought of Gilles Deleuze to locate his work as a genuine contribution in post-Kantian discussions about the nature of the transcendental field.² Particularly in *Logic of Sense*, Deleuze introduces the idea of the transcendental surface as a field which lacks the unificatory center of the empirical field. But at the same time he makes a distinction, within the transcendental field, between the transcendental surface and the transcendental depth, particularly by introducing the notions of the simulacrum, or the mad or schizophrenic matter, and bringing to the scene the figure of Antoine Artaud against that of Lewis Carroll in the 15th series of *Logic of Sense* and the psychoanalytical part of the book. Whereas the empirical depth signifies the objective differentiated matter, the transcendental depth marks an undifferentiated materiality. The distinction between the transcendental surface and the transcendental depth can also be considered as that between sense and

¹Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn.

²See for example Henry Somers-Hall, *Hegel, Deleuze and the Critique of Representation: Dialectics of Negation and Difference* (State University of New York Press, 2012), and Daniela Voss, *Conditions of Thought: Deleuze and Transcendental Ideas* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013). Deleuze's contribution can be summarized as the reformulation that he makes in the definition of the transcendental, and moves from the conditions of any possible experience towards the conditions of actual experiences. Deleuze considers the former as the elements of formal conditioning (which is elaborated in Kant's "transcendental analytic") whereas the latter constitutes the real condition and forms the real transcendental field (which is sketched in Maimon and Fichte).

nonsense. And Deleuze maintains that “between sense and nonsense” there is “an original type of intrinsic relation” so that nonsense is the genetic element of sense.³ This distinction and relation between surface and depth or sense and nonsense is the principal interest here.

In “Michel Tournier and the World Without Others” Deleuze explains this distinction within the transcendental field in reference to the notion of the other as an *a priori* structure vis-à-vis “the World Without others” as the groundless ground or *sans-fond*. In order to understand how Deleuze regards any structure as always the “structure-other” it should be enough to consider his description of the nature of structure in “How do we recognize Structuralism?” and to pay particular attention to his treatment of Jacques Lacan’s depiction of a symbolic structure where the Other plays an essential role.⁴ While Deleuze’s description of structure is mostly a symbolic or a superficial account, one can even here find an initial separation between the transcendental surface or the structure-other and the transcendental depth or the dissipation of the other. This separation finds its full elaboration in “Michel Tournier and the World Without Others” which is a text on the transcendental depth or the structure of the absence of the other.

Against these two notions (the transcendental surface and the transcendental depth, the other and the absence of the other) stands the I or ego which is considered by some philosophers as the ground or the transcendental field. However, Deleuze demonstrates that their efforts fail because the ego is just an empirical result and cannot play a transcendental role. Therefore, the transcendental field cannot be explained with a basis in the I, but rather based on the role of the other, its presence and absence. In the text on Michel Tournier, Deleuze explains this distinction (between presence and absence of the other) by asking the following questions: what would be perception with the other as structure, and what would it be if there is no other? This is indeed making a dualism between “the effects of the ‘structure-other’ in the field of perception and the effects of its absence (what would be perception if there was no other?).”⁵ The other as the structure is another name for sense as the transcendental surface, what differentiates and opens all possibilities in a possible world. It marks the condition of objectivity by separating it from subjectivity. This is what is done through the mediation of the other: “The part of the object that I do not see, I posit to be seen at the same time by the other.”⁶ The perception in the world with others is the perception of objects, or, say, phenomena.

But the major concern here pertains to the transcendental depth or perception in a world without others. It is obvious that the perception in a world without others is not at all the perception of an ego because the latter is just the result of social communication with the others. Thus, when the others disappear, what remains is not the I or ego. When there is no other, it is the ego that gradually dissipates. In “Michel Tournier and the World Without Others”, Deleuze explains this dissipation through a reading of Tournier’s *Vendredi or les limbes du Pacifique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967) which is Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* being retold and drastically modified. What makes Tournier’s Robinson interesting for Deleuze is that, unlike Defoe’s story, it is not about the origins and the imaginary reconstruction of the same life that he had lived before being shipwrecked, but, rather, a philosophical experimentation which examines the nature of perception in the absence of others. At first, Robinson could not but restore the language with which he used to speak and think, and while doing this he had been restoring the other. But, after a while, he begins to lose his communicative cage in order to become identical with the island itself:

Consciousness ceases to be a light cast upon objects in order to become a pure phosphorescence of things in themselves. Robinson is but the consciousness of the island, but the consciousness of the island is the consciousness the island has of itself – it is the island itself. We understand thus the paradox of the desert island: the one who is shipwrecked, if he is alone, if he has lost the structure-other, disrupts nothing of the desert island; rather he consecrates it. (Deleuze 1969, 362; Deleuze 2015, 319-320)

The identification of the shipwrecked with the desert island is also the main theme for another text that Deleuze wrote on *Desert Islands*. In that text, Deleuze introduces an *elan* for isolation and creativity which is not conscious but provides a kind of collective unconscious drive which is marked by the dreams of peoples. According to Deleuze, this unconscious drive defines the mythology in which each people dreams. Defoe’s Robinson represents the misinterpretation of a genuine mythology and he displays

³Gilles Deleuze, *Logiques du Sens* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 85.

⁴See Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormini (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 172-174. Here, the Other appears in the form of the symbolic father or the “Name-of-the-Father.”

⁵Deleuze 1969, 358.

⁶“La partie de l’objet que je ne vois pas, je la pose en même temps comme visible pour autrui”, Deleuze 1969, 355.

the reduction of the mythical economy of free imagination into the market economy of possession.⁷ The mythical economy marks the desert island as the place of infinite creativity and imagination. In Deleuze's later text on Desert Islands, Tournier materializes this mythology. Thus, the identification with the island itself can be construed as returning back towards the unconscious and mythical *elan* for isolation and creativity.

This is not only Deleuze's endorsement of Tournier against Defoe, and mythology (and modern literature) against classical literature, but it is also his response to a phenomenological tradition that introduces a universal consciousness instead of the transcendental ego, the way Sartre stands against Husserl. In Deleuze's critique of Sartre's *The Transcendence of the Ego*, the notion of a universal consciousness suffers from the same deficiency that Sartre diagnosed in Husserl, and should be replaced by a universal unconscious (the mythology in which people dream).⁸ In this manner, consciousness evolves to become the island itself, the thing in itself, in its full materiality; it turns out to be the material transcendental field, or what we call the transcendental depth. Therefore, we have here a three-step procedure, from the empirical ego, via the other as transcendental surface, and then to the absence of the other as the materialization of the transcendental, or pushing it into the depth or *sans-fond*.⁹ In this way, the transcendental is dehumanized ("déshumanisé"): the transcendental becomes the island.¹⁰

Of course, this process has to be gradual, since the first thing that the disappearance of the other triggers is an effort to retain the structure of the other in its absence. This is what Deleuze considers as "neurosis."¹¹ Our first reaction to the absence of the other is despair, which happens when "the structure-other is still functioning, though there is no longer anyone to fill it out or actualize it."¹² And Deleuze claims that in this situation the structure functions more rigorously. This is the neurotic loneliness that is full of pain, suffering and regret, while one ends up amusing oneself by reviewing past stories.

Robinson, in Tournier's story, does not stay in this neurotic phase, but rather he tries to amuse himself with order and hard work and in this way changes the phase. This is still an effort to retain the structure of the other, but this time he saves the objects by creating them. When you are not sure if there are objects, since there is no other, you can simply construct them. Objects belong to the same structure of the other, to the same organization and order. Robinson produces objects for consumption, and therefore, there is an economy and ethics in this production-consumption in which the former is good and the latter is bad. But this is only a mediatory phase in order to move towards a mad production of objects, followed by the dissipation of all objects towards an emphasis on the pure materiality, the depth of the earth, and the island itself. In this mad production of objects, the produced objects are not useful anymore, and they are produced just for the sake of production (the production of simulacra). Where there is no consumption, the economy and ethics, or the structure of the other, will collapse. It represents an extreme form of bureaucracy, which is pure and mad (and is dramatized perfectly in Kafka's novels). It also suggests a move against the neurosis, which is still attached to the structure and the organization of the other, for using and for being useful, towards the psychosis or the production of the schizophrenic object, an object which is not useful, and has no place in the structure of the world with others. Deleuze takes an untransportable boat made by Robinson on the island as an example of such a schizophrenic object and compares it in a footnote with Henry Michaux's description of a table which is made by a schizophrenic.¹³ In *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari develop further their thinking on the schizophrenic table described by Michaux, and quote its description at length, making it a perfect example of the productive act of desire.¹⁴

Thus, the result of the full dissolution of the structure of the other is the aggressive return of *sans-fond* (the bottomless abyss), the point where psychosis attacks neurosis, and schizophrenia takes the place of loneliness and despair. But the story does not stop at the point of a happy schizophrenic who plays alone on a desert island: it does not stop at the point of a Beckettian nihilism. In Deleuze's reading,

⁷Deleuze 2004, 9-12.

⁸Jean Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 3; Deleuze 1969, 124; Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 32 (n. 2).

⁹Deleuze's "transcendental materialism" is criticized by the so-called speculative philosophers who claim that speculative materialism is the only true materialism. They accuse Deleuze of conjuring spiritualism in the guise of materialism. See for example Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 222; and Quentin Meillassoux, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Sign Devoid of Meaning" in *Genealogies of Speculation: Materialism and Subjectivity since Structuralism*, eds. S. Malik and A. Avanesian (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 117-198, the reference here is to p. 132.

¹⁰Deleuze 1969, 363.

¹¹Deleuze 1969, 364.

¹²Deleuze 1969, 364.

¹³Deleuze 1969, 365.

¹⁴Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 6-7.

the main character of Tournier's story is not Robinson, but a young boy called Friday who initiates the formation of a new surface (phantasm) out of depth (simulacrum). Unlike Defoe's story, Friday here does not accept to be enslaved for Robinson but metaphorically eats him.¹⁵ He accomplishes the journey that Robinson had begun on the desert island by turning the schizophrenic happy solitude into the formation of a new schizophrenic sociality and communication. It is not at all a rediscovery of the structure of the other, since, according to Deleuze, it "is too late for that, the structure has disappeared."¹⁶ It is an establishment of a totally new structure whose founder (Friday) "is not an other, but something wholly other" ("Non pas un autrui, mais un tout-autre qu'autrui").¹⁷ This formation of a new surface (the surface of phantasm and thought) is done through the process of desexualization, and since Friday is not an other, he does not stimulate sexual appeal in Robinson. Sexuality belongs to the physical surface of social needs and linguistic communications.¹⁸ But this a-sexual, a-social surface which is formed within the depth of earth and the materiality of *sans-fond* is something totally different. It cannot be defined within a world or compossible worlds; it defines the communication of divergent series and impossible worlds. Schizophrenia in this way gains a utopian value, for it helps us to think about a totally different communication. It marks what Deleuze calls the "Great Health" ("la grande Santé").¹⁹ Neurotics find their health neither in the reparation of the ego or the structure-other, nor in the image of a private schizophrenic, but rather the formation of a new form of communication and a new community. In this regard, psychoanalysis is for Deleuze essentially political. A schizophrenic who wanders alone on a desert island finds its value and health only in being an element of a new society which is formed not on the basis of common needs, such as sexuality (in its different forms, including love), but rather based on divergences. In this new utopian society, the sexual difference which belongs to the structure of the other gives its place to the infinite multiplication of differences which are too unstable to favor needs. They underlie the positivity of desire. We should move from the human violence of love (which is dependent to the stability of sexual difference) towards an inhuman and natural violence in the form of a resonance of divergent series and impossible worlds. This is the aim of the whole story: a schizophrenic utopia.

In the text "Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Precursor of Kafka, Celine and Ponge" which appeared in *Desert Island and Other Texts*, Deleuze approaches a connection between the idea of the absence of the others and that of a schizophrenic social life. First and foremost, he takes a stand against the idea of common needs as the *raison d'être* of societies, declaring that "one of Rousseau's constant themes is that need is not a factor which brings people together: it does not unite, it isolates each of us."²⁰ Need is a source of self-sufficiency and egoism, and to consider it as a common element would lead to the main paradox of our time: "The root of evil in modern society is that we are no longer either private individuals or public citizens: each of us has become 'homo oeconomicus' in other words, 'bourgeois', motivated by profit."²¹ The result is that we are "mean." The only problem with capitalism is that it makes us mean. It makes our dreams cheap (which is exemplified in the manner Defoe's Robinson is indeed a cheap bourgeois interpretation of the myths of desert island). Now, Deleuze demonstrates that Rousseau in two of his great works, *Emile* and *The Social Contract*, indicates two different yet interconnected ways to restore a true commonality. *Emile* is about the reconstitution of the private individual, while *The Social Contract* deals with that of the citizen: they are two sides of a coin that marks social life as different from a modern need-based sociality. In this context, we can make a connection between Deleuze's account of schizophrenia in his reading of Tournier's Robinson, which underlies a departure point for a material utopia, and an actually social schizophrenia which is delineated in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

It is not surprising that Deleuze, in "Klossowski or Bodies-Language" (the first part of the second appendix to *Logic of Sense* called "Phantasm and Modern Literature") makes a contribution to Bataille's solar economy and Derrida's general economy. The main aim of the Deleuzian idea of schizophrenia is this contribution in the utopian thought of a use-less communication and its economy. Michaux's useless

¹⁵See Deleuze 2004, 12: "Any healthy reader would dream of seeing him [Friday] eat Robinson." Compare with the notion of "Great Health" discussed below.

¹⁶Deleuze 1969, 367.

¹⁷Deleuze 1969, 368.

¹⁸This notion of "desexualization" appears in *Logic of Sense* in the Twenty-Ninth Series ("Good Intentions Are Inevitably Punished") and the Thirty-First Series ("Of Thought"). Deleuze takes this notion from Freud who elaborated it in the fourth chapter of *The Ego and the Id*. Of course, Deleuze modifies this notion for his own purposes, but the way Freud relates the desexualized energy to the death instinct is very significant for Deleuze. According to Deleuze, desexualization underlies the movement of abstraction from the physical surface of sexuality and the liberation of the metaphysical surface of thought through the mediation of phantasm. See, for example, Deleuze 1969, 242.

¹⁹Deleuze 1969, 367.

²⁰Deleuze 2004, 52.

²¹Deleuze 2004, 55.

table and desexualized Friday play the role of elements of this communication. In order to approach this thought Deleuze distinguishes, in “Klossowski or Bodies-Language”, between “exchange” and “true repetition”:

One theme runs through the entire work of Klossowski: the opposition between exchange and true repetition. For exchange implies only resemblance, even if the resemblance is extreme. Exactness is its criterion, along with the equivalence of exchanged products. This is the false repetition which causes our illness. True repetition, on the other hand, appears as a singular behavior that we display in relation to that which cannot be exchanged, replaced, or substituted – like a poem that is repeated on the condition that no word may be changed. It is no longer a matter of an equivalence between similar things, it is not even a matter of an identity of the Same. True repetition addresses something singular, unchangeable, and different, without ‘identity’. Instead of exchanging the similar and identifying the Same, *it authenticates the different*. (Deleuze 1969, 333-334; Deleuze 2015, 297-298)

The exchange economy is only possible on the condition that it generates understanding and identity amongst people; it rules over what we call the market economy. Moreover, it is the cause of illness and meanness amongst us. On the contrary, Deleuze suggests an economy which may bring the Great Health, and is marked by the idea of “true repetition,” considered in this text from how pantomime stands against conceptual linguistic communication.²² Pantomime marks the communication of difference while conceptual language only makes the Same communicable. Difference can be communicated through pantomime and poetry, but not through understanding. It is “the unexchangeable.” What repeats itself in true repetition, Deleuze claims, is “the intensity of Difference.”²³ Difference has no identity, but rather intensity. The sickening illusion is to believe that we can fully understand and exchange things. What understands and exchanges is an ego, and the ego lacks intensity. Thus, we can distinguish the sick violence of ego from intensive healthy violence. Nature is full of the latter, while the former belongs only to an ego-centric consciousness.²⁴ At this point, Deleuze’s philosophy is not far from Levinas’ description of ethics as prior to understanding, reasoning and justification. Both philosophers search for the possibility of a communication which is capable of communicating the unexchangeable or the different (communication of divergent series in a disjunctive synthesis). It is not only about the ethical aspects of communication, but it also deals with the phenomenological problem of expressing the inexpressible. Hence, both Deleuze and Levinas deal with a dilemma through which the dialectic of language and ego brings ethics and phenomenology together: it is through language that ego takes its form, but it is also through language that we grasp the dissolution of the ego. Therefore, we can imagine non-conceptual, corporeal language as the medium of an ethical communication in a Levinasian sense. Hence, Deleuze’s point is not putting language and pantomime against each other, but rather it is about introducing a pantomime within language:

If language *imitates* bodies, it is not through onomatopoeia, but through flexion. And if bodies imitate language, it is not through organs, but through flexion. There is an entire pantomime, internal to language, as a discourse or a story within the body. If gestures speak, it is first of all because words mimic gestures. (Deleuze 1969, 332; Deleuze 2015, 297)

The language at issue here defines a different kind of sociality. Here Deleuze argues against the orthodoxy of egoism and the way egos can relate to each other on the basis of common needs (this is also the source of common sense). What he introduces positively is the multiplicity of singularities which form intensities and intensive differences that define at each instance a flexion and deviation. It is through the flexion that bodies make sense.

In order to reach this point, we need not only the absence of ego but also the absence of the others as a primary structure. Now, we can see how the absence of the others can play the role of a new transcendental which is totally different from the transcendental ego and the structure of the other (the

²²This notion of “true repetition” finds its full explanation in *Difference and Repetition* where Deleuze praises “disguised repetition” or the repetition of difference against “bare repetition” or the repetition of the Same. In several occasions throughout the introduction of *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze emphasizes on the theatrical nature of “disguised repetition.” See, for example, Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 10-11, and 20.

²³Deleuze 1969, 335.

²⁴This helps to get rid of the confusing connections between natural violence and human violence, for example in some Nazi readings of Nietzsche or Lars von Trier’s *The House that Jack Built* (Nordisk Film, 2018). Natural violence has nothing to do with egoism together with all of its extensions (nationalism, racism, etc.).

transcendental surface). Throughout the texts we have considered here, Deleuze first distinguishes the *a priori Other* (*Autrui a priori*), designating the structure, from real others that actualize that structure in a certain field. This is the distinction between empirical individuals and the transcendental field in which the latter underlies the existence of the possible (the real condition of possibility): the other marks the structure of possibility of objects and subjects, their appearance in a world, and the relation between them, which can be called need. It is only in the structure of the other that it is possible to need an object, and along with this need come the pains and troubles of neurosis. This is what makes us not only ill but also mean. But then Deleuze discovers that the personage of “Robinson” introduces the absence of the other as structure or the *a priori* (or the transcendental). He calls the move from the structure of the other to the absence of the other as structure as a move towards the Great Health. This is a transition from neurosis towards psychosis and, particularly, schizophrenia. But how can psychosis take the form of a new organization and a new structure? In order to explain the absence of the other as structure, as there is no *a priori* without a structure, Deleuze considers it in terms of perversion. The structure of perversion is the principle of the absence of the other as structure. It marks the point of “flexion” (material plasticity) where language joins the body, and terminates conceptual communication as it learns how to express the inexpressible in “reflection.”²⁵ Let us call this the perverted transcendental field.

Again, Deleuze distinguishes a pervert’s behavior from the fundamentally perverse structure. What is crucial in order to grasp this structure, and to distinguish it from the behaviors of the pervert, is that there is no other in this structure. It is a big mistake to take the relationship between the pervert and his victims like the one between a self and the other; this is a confusion of the empirical and the transcendental, or the conditioned and the condition, similar to the confusion of egoist and natural violence (note 25 above). Perversion as structure contains no other, no object, and therefore no need and desire. Hence it disavows the difference of sexes, rendering the pervert sexually neutral. When a pervert man dresses like a woman, it is not due to a desire to be a woman, but rather an effort to neutralize his sexuality. Structurally, it indicates an initial movement of desexualization.

Through this reference to perversion, Deleuze attempts to introduce a new structure which is absolutely different from the structure of the world with the others, or the world of possibilities. The absence of the others as *a priori* structure has nothing to do with creating new possibilities. It brings forward a new category, which is *the necessary*:

The world of the pervert is a world without others, and thus a world without the possible. The other is that which renders possible. The perverse world is a world in which the category of the necessary has completely replaced that of the possible²⁶.

The structure of perversion is indicative of actions in the absence of subjects and objects, as well as desire and will. It is to the pervert in this sense that freedom liberates itself from consciousness. The notion of *the necessary* that Deleuze brings forward here has nothing to do either with determination or free will, which both are within the economy of the possible, or, if you prefer, the market economy. It marks the priority of action, of structure as action, as what takes place between impossible worlds when they meet in a field deprived of any possibility. The structure of perversion requires human beings for work but not for producing useful things. It works where the island meets the sky and fire meets iron: the world without the other, without the self, without consciousness, empty of objects and concepts, where helium (the necessary) takes the place of oxygen (the possible).²⁷

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²⁵Deleuze 1969, 331.

²⁶Deleuze 1969, 372.

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